

Salus was a geologically old planet, its major upheavals spent, leaving more plains than mountains. The old and tired continents were worn down, mostly smooth and soft. The eastern continent stretched as a vast expanse, mostly grasslands with many and varied species. Topography was rolling, without rugged features, flatter towards the west, more hilly to the east. Rivers flowed mostly north and east as the entire continent tilted up in the south. Minor streams emptied toward the west. The few features which could be called mountains were on the western continent. It was settled into a very regular orbit, with its single moon in stable orbit.

Jack and Jill first bumped into each other accidentally, then occasionally, then deliberately. They began to orbit each other like planets and moons locking together, while remaining careful and circumspect. Theirs was not the only love story among the colonists, just the sweetest one.

Jack was more wiry than muscular, taller than Jill. The pleasant expression he wore kept his features from being severe. Speaking with a soft bass voice and a relaxed posture, he blended in rather than standing out. His was a generous personality, observing and gently shepherding as needed.

On her arrival at the training camp, Jill's brunette hair extended down her back. Within a week, she assessed the training plan and cut her hair in a short pageboy. It was practical. Her keen and inquisitive eyes took in everything around her.

They were both fair skinned before the melanin treatments turned them to the darker shade colonists were given.

Jill observed how Jack acted around and reacted to others. She thought: This is a man to watch. So, she watched and continued to like what she saw. Jack saw her watching and liked what he saw.

Jack and Jill put themselves into the same groups. When necessary, they asked to be reassigned to the group the other one was in. They never mentioned each other, but quietly managed to be near one another.

As launch neared, all the colonists knew they would be choosing mates from among the small pool on each ship. Consequently, most people were cautious with relationships during the training period. Jack and Jill were no different. Sensitive observers noticed what was developing between them and smiled without comment.

By the time people began lifting to space, everyone knew Jack and Jill were a pair. They didn't go around holding hands; they were simply a dyad. On the long trip in from transition to planetary orbit around Salus, they arranged their sleep and wake days to match. They went down on the same bumpy and rough shuttle, full of eager, half-fearful anticipation. They stepped onto a new world side by side.

The first two years on the planet proved to be easy and went smoothly. Living in dormitories, Jack and Jill simply made sure their meal times and their times off work matched. There are no fireworks, just tighter and tighter orbits.

The colony was founded on the western edge of the eastern continent. Between the continents, initially called Econ and Wescon, was a series of straits. A wide expanse of ocean with island archipelagos covered the opposite side of the world.

After two years of steady and unrelenting work on the new planet, Chairman Roberta Frank called a general meeting. Roberta was a good administrator. She took the responsibility

seriously and with good humor. She preferred her genetics work, so she had a light touch as chairman.

The meeting was in the Common, the top level of the housing dome. Three levels of living spaces were stacked underneath. The main room on the top level took advantage of the domed roof, giving a sense of spaciousness with its high rounded ceiling. Large windows looked out from 270 degrees of the circle and gave views of all the surrounding land except where blocked by the other domes. One could see Landing Beach on the sea side. The walls were a bright swirl of colors. The designers had broken with centuries of drab and depressing grey to put lively color in the entire building. The colonists appreciated this and benefitted from the brighter tones.

The serving windows to the kitchens were open this evening, which was not usual for a large or general meeting. All the tables and chairs had been moved away into storage around the periphery of the room. The space felt large and hollow, especially with almost no one in it. As more people filtered in, they sat on the floor, as usual for big meetings. Meetings could run long and the space was echoingly large, planned for colonists and later their children. As more bodies filled the room, it echoed less and filled with a warm hum of low conversations. Virtually everyone was there by the assigned time. Essential employment people, working elsewhere, could listen in if they wanted to.

Roberta began simply enough, “We’ve all worked hard and as you all know we’re coming up on the second anniversary of landfall. The whole planet is out there for us to go and discover. It’s empty and it’s ours. For now, we have a firm foothold and two successful growing seasons. We’ve been blessed to end up on a planet that is habitable, comfortable and safe as far as we have seen, and empty of other intelligence or even dangers. We’ve heard about other colonies who have struggles far greater than ours. Our sympathies are certainly with them, but we are going to take time to celebrate our good fortune. We’re going to declare two days off.”

A general cheer went up around the room. Jack and Jill looked at each other and shared a broad smile.

“Everyone has been working hard, and even though there’s been time off, a general break is well deserved. Only essential personnel will be working. Those who must take duties during these two days will get extra comp time in the next few days. Let your hair down, people! Things are looking good. We had acceptable harvests and all the G-engineered crops are thriving.”

There were scattered cheers and shouts of approval again round the room. This was not news to anyone but rehearsal and celebration were good things to do.

“We’re going to have all the repro-pods sent down as soon as there’s a good weather opening to bring them in. We’re going to lift reproductive restrictions ahead of schedule.”

There was another loud general cheer. It had a noticeably higher pitch, as many of the women voiced their approval of this decision.

“We’re also going to begin immediately on the second phase of building, which, of course, includes housing for couples and families. After this building phase, perhaps we can look over some more of this world.

“Normal work schedules resume in three days. I’d like to make this a regular annual thing. We’ll see.

“That’s it, watch the feeds for any special announcements and assignments. I hope to see most of you on the beach tomorrow. The morning, at least, should be clear. And now: we’ve used some energy for ice cream tonight.”

At that the room erupted into raucous and happy noise. Roberta moved away from her position to indicate her speech was over. Smiling servers appeared in the kitchen hatches carrying tubs with frost streaming down the sides. The people nearest the hatches began to stand up.

Serving was a well-rehearsed choreography. The spaces near serving were left clear as people moved to the hatches. The next area began to stand and move toward the hatches. As their floor space cleared, those with bowls of ice cream moved into those positions and most sank to the floor. After their years of training on earth and the years on Salus, the movement was orderly, almost military. It was not a coercive order, rather a practiced and easy one. It was like a community of Shakers might have been. Conversations began and a general buzz filled the room with a good deal of laughter. A listener might hear new vocabulary which was developing and old insider jokes which the community shared. A new and healthful commune was growing on an alien planet. Roberta looked around with a smile. People were happy and content. There was movement at the door as some of those who had been listening from afar arrived for a share of ice cream.

A sudden commotion drew eyes as a dozen excited puppies exploded into the room. They each romped onto a human, bowling some over and receiving warm welcomes and petting. Sven Lavran ran in looking frantic and called out, "Who let the dogs out? I'm sorry, someone has been at the cages!"

The friendly sheep dogs were the first of the mammals from earth to be gestated on Salus. If successful, they would be the beginning of a large kennel and then of generations of pets and service animals.

Sven captured one of the wriggling puppies. He tucked it under an arm and turned to capture another. Several voices called out, "Leave them!" and he stopped and looked around. Other voices called out, "They're fine, let them have fun."

Everyone seemed happy to see the joyful and energetic puppies and no one was troubled by their presence. Sven realized the dogs were not doing any harm and decided to leave them. This would be good socializing time. Later he could get help and take them back to the kennel. Sven rubbed the head of the one in his arm and put it down. It promptly jumped into the lap of a woman sitting nearby and stretched up to lick her face. Other people came to pet a puppy.

Sven looked around again and moved to get into the ice cream line. He could corral dogs after his treat.

Jack and Jill sat together among friends savoring their ice cream. They looked over at each other and smiled. It was a sweet warm smile, the kind to put goosebumps up your back if you receive it. Jill looked down at the plain utilitarian bowl and her half-eaten confection. She had been waiting for this decision to enter the next phase of colonization.

She said quietly, "So what do you think about registering this evening and then going to sleep in the dunes?"

Jack's smile broadened and he looked at her. "There's an idea I can get behind."

"I thought it might be."

After dinner, they slipped off to the communications room. It was always manned and served multiple purposes in administration. There they simply signed a marriage declaration together. It was legally registered according to the colony's informal customs. Aaron, the ship-bound NCI, was always present and monitoring and served as their second witness with the duty comperson.

They went to their dorms and each brought a blanket to meet outside the dome. Carrying towels and blankets they strolled toward the swimming beach. This was a narrow and beautiful strand further away than Landing Beach which was almost adjacent to the settlement.

All around them was the gently rolling grassland. The night robbed the scenery of color. There was no light or dust pollution and the stars were bright. The Milky Way was a broad luminous band across the night sky. Most of the constellations were no different from Earth's.

Toward the sea, dunes rose slightly, hiding the water's edge. They were covered with a distinctive grass which whispered in the wind. The breeze still blew in from the ocean as the air rose above the sun warmed land. The couple moved away from the domes, their eyes adjusting to the darkness. The air was moist with a salt tang. As they walked along, they realized they were not the only people who had decided to go into the dunes. There were couples on the path ahead of them and they could hear people speaking softly behind them. Jack reached out for Jill's hand and gave it a squeeze. They walked along in companionable silence but there was a rising frisson in them and Jill walked closer to Jack so their shoulders began to bump and rub as they walked. They found it more comfortable to begin walking with arms around each other's waist and the tension between them rose. The gravelly soil scrunched softly underfoot and turned to a softer crunch as it became sandy on the dunes.

There were fewer night sounds than on earth. No night birds, no insects, no frogs chirped in the still air. The moon behind them cast long shadows toward the east. The moon, always bright to earth sensibilities, orbited closer to the planet and faster than earth's Luna.

Reaching the beach proper they hesitated a moment. Then they turned left and walked toward the top of the beach on the south end and into the dunes there.

Finding a shallow sandy depression, they stood and looked around. Having no sense of anyone nearby, Jack spread a blanket on the ground and took Jill in his arms. A tiny wisp of green odor rose from the bruised grass under the blanket. They did not notice it.

As their kissing became more passionate, they kicked off their shoes and helped each other remove their clothes with some fumbles and some giggles and not a little tickling. Their love-making was urgent and passionate.

They lay together on the blanket, spent and happy and comfortably warm, with the night sky over them. The stalks of the whispering grasses moved only slightly in the shifting air.

Jill spoke first. "Shall we have a skinny dip before we sleep."

Jack smiled and disengaged his arm so he could roll over. "I'm not sure about sleep, but a dip would be nice. Do you want to take a towel or is the darkness enough cover?"

Jill glanced around and replied, "Let's let the night be our cover."

Leaving things on the blanket they hurried toward the water line. The smooth pebble sand crunched under their feet. There was one other couple swimming, dimly discernable. They gave them a wide berth and plunged into the chilly water.

They walked out of the water together, hands finding each other's bodies as they walked back to their blanket.

They made love again in a ~~much~~ longer and slower manner with small murmurs of direction and appreciation. They drifted off to sleep ~~in each other's arms~~, very much at peace. They slept deeply, contented and satiated, entwined and touching. Occasionally one moved to free a limb and resume sleep with a caress.

In the morning before it was light Jack woke to find Jill's eyes watching him.

"Good morning, been awake long," he asked.

"Only a few moments, but good moments. Let's swim again and come back here."

Jack responded eagerly, getting up and then helping Jill to her feet. They swam briefly and returned to the blanket as the sky began to lighten. They made love gently and slowly and drifted off to sleep again.

They woke at the same time and looked into each other's eyes, smiling.

The breeze had turned as the land cooled and the sea kept its warmth. There were no flowers, no scents to attract pollinators, no animals to leave droppings or to bruise the grass to give up its scent. The air was normally as tasteless as distilled water. Now it brought the dry dusty odor of the recently harvested wheat. There were subtle scents, barely discernible, from the herb gardens, mint, basil and lavender.

After another brief swim and with the sky brightening toward daylight, they left the water and strolled up the sand, idly toweling off their wet bodies. Their eyes fell on each other with pleasure and without embarrassment. They picked up their blanket to shake the sand off. Jill sat down and Jack stretched out watching her.

Jill looked at Jack and asked, "How long do you think it will be before we can go explore more of this world? I can't get over the whole thing."

"How do you mean?"

"Can you smell the grass under the blanket?" Jack turned his head as he lay there, sniffed and nodded. "It's not quite like any grass I ever smelled at home. Forget the blue, that's just an accident, not any essential part of the grass, really. And the plants we call grass are not earth grass. They're good analogs, but never quite the same. Parallel evolution has made similar plants but only similar. For example, have you ever noticed the leaves of the grass? Every one I have seen so far has a ragged end, not finished like earth leaves. I never saw a leaf like this on earth, unless it was eaten, broken, mown or made ragged by the wind. Everything is so similar but not quite the same. Just think about exploring this entire world! It intoxicates me! And we get to do that together."

"Yeah. It's an exciting prospect. I tend not to dwell on it. I just focus on what we need to do today, or tomorrow."

"Mostly I do too, but sometimes . . ."

"I don't know about the timing. Two solid years with things looking good. Surely after this building expansion there should be time for some of us to branch out and see what the whole planet is like. That's what Roberta said. Maybe we can be two of those who go. Or at least we'll get a turn at it." He turned and looked toward the ocean.

Jill interrupted his reverie. "Do you remember our rotation through the Enclave?"

"Of course. It was quite a place."

"Well, one of the things which has stuck with me is the amazing stone of that place. Remember how the floors in the hallways were just left as the living stone? Some was polished to a leathered finish; some was honed, more rough, and some was even flamed. That was in the high traffic areas, like the entry and in the atrium. But in the apartments, at least the ones I saw, the floors were polished to a high shine or a subtle satin. And many parts of the walls in the halls were the same. That stone was astonishingly beautiful. I think they may have had someone sensitive to such beauty decide what finish to put on different stone areas and where to leave live stone. I've never forgotten it. All that beauty is normally hidden. It was always there, but no one could see it until it was uncovered. If there is a God, she always saw that beauty. If a flower blooms in a high mountain glade she sees it. If a tree falls in a forest, she hears it. Always. Everywhere. This world must be full of such beauty. Not just the things hidden in the stones, also above ground, and no one has ever seen it! I want to go out and see it."

“Those are pretty deep thoughts for so early in the morning. But I’m game. I’ll go with you to see it. But I want to eat first.”

They lay peacefully in each other’s arms as the morning warmed and they began to hear voices from the beach.

Jack asked, “Are you ready for another swim?”

“Sure, sounds like the day has begun, let’s go. Maybe they will have something for you to eat.”

There were probably a hundred people already on the long crescent of beach. By well-established custom, nude men were on the south end, nude women on the north end, and suited swimmers in the middle of the broad expanse. Jack and Jill donned the swimming suits they had worn under their coveralls on the walk down and gathering their other things, walked off to join the central group of people, keeping an eye out for their friends.

Janet called out them, “Yo, Jill!” and they moved that way. Janet sat with Bob well out on the north end of the crowd. She stayed with the suited people but she really liked to go and skinny dip with the women sometimes. She always chose to set up a place north of center.

As they sat down, Janet gave them an appraising look. “There’s something different this morning,” she said, raising her eyebrows. “You guys have been up awhile, haven’t you?”

“Yes, we came down earlier.”

“Oh, baby!” Janet laughed, “That is not what I meant. You’ve been down here in the dunes for hours, haven’t you.”

“A while, anyway,” Jill smiled widely with only a slight blush. The colonists had very little prudery. After years together the small community knew each other well.

Bob interjected, “More like all night, I think.”

“But was it good?”

Jack and Jill let their smiles answer.

Jill looked around at her compatriots. After two years of training, eighteen months in space and two years on the colony, she knew every brown face and almost every name. She did not know them all well, but these were her people. It was a comfortable feeling, perhaps like being on a big picnic with a very extended but close family. Having everyone here on the beach felt unlike when everyone gathered in the dining room or in a meeting.

She noticed how different everyone looked in various attire, or today’s lack of attire. Everyone had the same issue but here, more than in their basic coveralls and overalls, many had done alterations to give them a personal touch. Women especially had tailored their swimming suits, which amused Jill. She smiled at her hypocrisy, since she, too, had taken in her own swimming suit so it was not baggy in the middle.

On reflection, she realized the common uniform which everyone wore daily did not serve to make people uniform. Instead, it caused the person to be more visible, less defined by their clothing. What they wore became an expression of them in a different way as they refined their similar apparel. Small alterations conveyed so much about a person. Some women, Martha was one, cut their trouser legs short to show off good calves or just a well-turned ankle. Some popped their collar up, like Stephanie Swin, to look jaunty, or even cut out the collar to give an open neck and show more skin like XXX. Some cut the arms in various manners. There was a multitude of ways the one simple garment had been altered. Jill thought she saw her friends and acquaintances more clearly just because all wore very similar clothing. The men were perhaps more subtle but also expressed themselves through their simple clothing, how they buttoned it, how they wore their sleeves. Even the melanin treatments which had given everyone the same

brown skin tones had not homogenized them. She thought perhaps it leveled the field and brought the personalities out more.

She ruminated on the odd paradox for a few minutes. Jack had been dressed very much like all the men in the colony training. Simple coveralls, possibly showing, by its wear or dirt, what job he was working on. It had been his behavior, not his clothing, which attracted her. His eyes were always active, checking everyone around, just as he was doing now. He watched for uncertainty or tension to see if someone needed a helping hand or a friendly word. Jill reached out a hand to briefly caress his knee and received a bright smile in response. Her heart warmed and she rejoined the conversation.

Martha came down the beach, her steps crunching on the rough sand. She was a little older than most colonists because she applied for the colony selection late in college. She had completed testing while working five years as a nurse. She came with experience and a reassuring and almost motherly demeanor. Everyone knew and liked her. She was one of the small core of Jill's closest friends. Petyr walked with her, an easy-going tousle-headed geneticist who was usually with Martha in rec time. They dropped towels with smiles and nods, and shed coveralls and headed down to swim.

"We'll come with you." Said Jill, jumping up. "We were headed for a swim when we were waylaid." Jack stood up to follow.

"If you were waylaid or laid in any other way, it was not by us." Janet shot at their retreating backs with a wicked smile and a laugh. Martha looked back with raised eyebrows and a question in her eyes. "Jack and Jill finally went over the hill," Janet called loud enough for others to hear.

From one of the nearby groups a voice spoke loud enough for people around to hear, "Ah, the mysterious land of Mons Venus."

Jill stiffened slightly but walked on as if she had heard nothing.

A man's voice called, "Cometh the hour, cometh the man."

A woman's voice next to his said, "Don't be rude! Cometh the woman too, I hope."

Just as they arrived back from a short dip, Stephanie Swin arrived and sat down with the group. She made no move toward swimming. She was one of the communication specialists. In contrast to her job, she sat quietly listening to the conversation. She was always an easy person to sit with, but not given to much talk. She shrugged off the top of her coverall to reveal a brief swimming top and her melanin-enhanced brown skin. Clearly, she was enjoying the warming sun on her back.

As more and more people came to the swimming beach, the holiday mood increased. Volleyball games were set up and other games began, both quiet chess and noisy kick ball. People were in a festive mood and circulated among friends. It soon became clear, as more and more coveralls came off, a number of women had not waited for the reproductive all clear. There were many who appeared to be in the early months of pregnancies.

As if by plan, many of those women drifted together after lunch and began to chat about children, stretch marks, due dates and names. A population increase, if not an explosion, was on the way. Raucous laughter sometimes erupted from the circle causing Jill to look over. Several friends were there, but she was not ready to join the motherhood movement. There would be a time for that. Medical advances had long ago made birth control easy and very reliable.

The accident happened only eight days later.

True to Roberta's announcement, assembly began on the second ring of buildings. The hardware was already down on the landing beach near the settlement. It had been dropped in

several pods brought down during clear breaks in the current rainy season. It was being moved a load at a time to staging areas near the great domes.

The drop pods were designed to be dropped from the mother ship as needed. There were dozens of them with a vast array of contents. The pods were strictly one-way objects, large storage devices, virtually warehouses, carefully arranged in categories and combinations. They were dropped precisely from orbit, extending wings by degrees as they fell through the atmosphere, entering a glide path which would bring them to the sheltered bay beside the settlement. Aaron controlled their descent. They had to be brought down when weather patterns allowed a predictable path and the deep water of the bay was calm enough for a smooth landing. Then their minimal power could move them slowly to the beach from which they could be winched onto land. There they were emptied and then dismantled for repurposing.

A few pods, the medical ones, were made to become prefabricated buildings once they were emptied. These were wheeled into place after they were lightened. Fifty years of planning had made efficient designs. All the colony ships left earth with the same resources. Some, like the weapons and mountain climbing paraphernalia would not be needed on Salus. Everyone was keenly aware there would be no returning for spares and no resupply. Settlement meteorology was now watching for a pattern favorable for bringing down some remaining building pods as well as the reproductive medical pod.

The colony domes could last for a hundred years but after two they were beginning to show wear. They were called F, G and H. H was for habitat, where everyone lived and had commissary and commons and any indoor recreation. G was for gardening where hydroponics and early and sensitive gardening took place, with all the crop genetics labs and various other spaces. F stood for Fixing where workshops, garages and offices were housed as well as the self-contained nuclear power plant and a field generator. This triangle of domes could have defensive walls forming a central courtyard between them. They could be connected by tunnels if necessary. This versatile plan was part of the one-size-fits all package for colonies. No wall was needed here and airlocks had never been installed, because the planet's heavy atmosphere was breathable.

The new buildings would be placed in a series of arcs on the side away from the nearby sea, so an open pathway to the landing beach was maintained. The form had been developed in the Twentieth Century at Black Rock City, an arts and community development in a Nevada desert which was set up and removed annually. Construction techniques were well known and suited the warm humid climate well. For most buildings the walls were 3D printed. The matrix used local materials and dried hard and fast. Roofing was extruded and expanded plasticized material, formed and then hardened, epoxy style. Local sand, gravel and plant matter were plentiful for raw materials. In this kind climate without insects the windows were left open.

Building materials were moving from the assembly stockpiles to locations along the first ark of the new settlement street, which would be A Street. John Stodges was using the fork lift attachments on a versatile heavy mover. It was a day of brilliant yellow sunshine, the kind to make a person step lively and feel optimistic. It was 28 degrees with a light breeze and a very light gray haze of high wispy clouds.

John lifted a load for the next houses. He backed and turned without lowering the load; he would lower it moving forward. He was moving forward and reaching for the lowering lever when his front left wheel hit a patch of soft sand. It shifted under the weight. It had been fine to walk over for two years, but did not support this weight. As the front corner began to sink to the left, John reflexively turned the wheel to the right. This put the momentum away from his path

and made the tipping increase. The load went left as the fork lift went right. Jack had been walking along beside it, going toward the same building to begin his work. As the load tipped, he reached to steady it without thinking, just as John turned. Jack barely had time to register the mistake. 200 kilograms crushed down on him.

Some of the colonists still wore the whistles which were compulsory when they first arrived. Whistles began to blow, quickly drawing a crowd. Most were reaching for the load to push it, lift it, roll it, whatever they could do. It had no effect. Petyr Falk was a senior building engineer on the scene and he cut through the chaos with a long blast of his whistle. He organized everyone to grab specific places around the load in moments. Sixty hands lifted as one and held the load up while three men pulled Jack clear. It was clear before the load was set back down, there was nothing to be done. The colony had its first death.

Everyone stood shocked and dumb. Petyr remained level headed. After a few moments he called to four people to get a stretcher and move Jack to the medical rooms. The sick bay had hardly been needed and had seen no serious injuries before this.

Then he called out in a level and gentle voice: "Is anyone here close to Jack and Jill?"

It was Janet who stepped out. Her coverall was dirty and she still had on work gloves from handling building materials.

She understood the request and simply said, "I'll go."

She turned and, finding Bob's face in the crowd, nodded to gather him with her as she walked toward the vegetable fields. She also gestured to Stephanie Swin as she walked by. They walked resolutely off with grim faces as the stretcher arrived. The crowd began to return to their tasks. Two or three went to talk to John who was sitting on the ground leaning his back against the heavy mover's tire and rocking slightly forward and back. Tears trickled down his face.

Jill was in the fields checking to see if their hive of bees had successfully pollinated the tomato plants and others in the test gardens. When they neared her and were moving down between the green rows, she looked up to see them. She stood, enquiry on her face.

Janet knew it was cruel but direct and complete communication was needed. "Jill, there was an accident with a mover and Jack has been killed in the stockpile area."

Jill looked at them in surprise and disbelief. Momentarily she looked for the joke, in denial. But she quickly saw in their faces that they brought the truth. She stood a moment and then began to make a high keening sound of grief in a long breath. She sank to the moist soil. Her friends, not trying to keep her erect or pick her up, knelt around her, reaching out silent hands of comfort.

They sat with her while she cried. Time passed.

Finally, she wiped her tears, smearing her face with a dirty hand, and asked, "Can I see him."

"Sure" said Janet, "Let's go in."

A week after Jack's death, Jill knocked on the door of the central office where Roberta worked.

"Hi, Jill," she said gently, "What can I do for you?"

"I'd like to leave." Roberta raised her eyebrows in query. "Sorry, that came out wrong. I'd like to get away. Everyone is very kind and they are not overdoing their concern. But I'm an introvert and I really need some solitude to rebuild and reset. I'm pretty much sleepwalking now and my absence will not leave much of a gap. Can you let me go?"

"What do you have in mind?"

“I’d like to take one of the small ATVs and get away. I could be useful for surveying beyond where our first teams went. Early scouts went a limited distance to see what they could find. Most of them went inland. What if I went down the coast? We have satellite photos for maps. I could survey on the ground. I can camp. Weather is mild. Rainy season should end soon. I can live on MRE’s, we have good stocks. There is so much we just don’t know only a few Ks from this place. We need to start looking further afield and I can do it.”

“I can’t let you be out of touch for an extended period. That’s not safe.”

“Yeah, of course. I can take a radio and check in. Daily if you like. Please, just let me get away.”

“Okay, here’s what we’ll do now. Give me a day to think it over. Tell your super you’re to be off work for the next two days. All, everything. He can shift the schedule. No one will complain. Go sleep or rest. Get out of the camp, take a walk, or swim. Come back after midmeal tomorrow and we’ll talk. Is that okay for now?”

“Sure. Thanks. See you tomorrow.”

Roberta spoke with people whose opinions she valued, including her partner. None of them could see a problem. She went to find Janet, whom she knew she was close to Jill. Janet was in the common room having an early endmeal. When she heard the question, Janet looked around at the knots of people at the tables eating and lounging in their coveralls in various states of clean, dirty or shabby. They were subdued, as was usual in the evening, but the atmosphere was pleasant. She considered a moment and said, “Yes, this may be a good idea. You don’t have to worry about her going out. She aced all the survival courses and even ATV maintenance. She was rock solid even before Jack. People are different, as we all know. Time alone may be her best answer right now. I’m different; I’d want everyone I know to be in hugging distance. But that’s not Jill. Let her go. My opinion is: she’s good to go.”

When Jill appeared at the office door the next day, Roberta, all business, spoke first. “I won’t keep you hanging. The answer is yes.

“Here are the conditions: One, radio contact every day as the sun goes over the horizon. Evenings, not sunrise, because you have to pick your overnight site before sunset. That’s two. You can talk to whoever is on communications, no problem. They will all know to listen for you. If there’s something important, they can call me or tell me.

“Three, you keep a journal. I don’t care if it’s emotional or geographic, or whatever, but I want a meaningful entry every day. You decide what’s in it and whether it comes to me later, I put no limits there except you keep it.

“Four: You’ll have to take a medium ATV. They are less maneuverable, but you’ll need it to take enough stores for a long trip. Being solar, it’ll be slow, but you can make a good distance each day. You may begin drawing stores this afternoon. If anyone wants to check that you’re cleared, they can find authorization on today’s note board for supers. I didn’t put it on the general board for everyone to see. Two or three people already know you’re going, including Janet. Who you tell is up to you. Come back healthy.” She looked at her, waiting for a response. Jill just gave her a small smile and a sharp nod and turned to go. Her thanks were unspoken but no less clear.

Jill spent the afternoon checking out an ATV and stocking provisions on it with what equipment she could scrounge to help with camping. The ATVs were versatile all-terrain vehicles which could be configured for passengers or cargo. They moved slowly using an electric motor and power from batteries charged by the overhead solar panels. There was no beauty or style to them. They were engineered to be sturdy and dependable. Painted a greyish

green they were almost military in their utilitarian rust-preventing drabness. Jill arranged hers for cargo. Items from the first days on the bare new planet remained packed away in storage, camp stoves and nylon shelters and infamous Meals-Ready-to-Eat. She worked steadily and was content with what she had by late endmeal time. She had to remind herself to go to communications and check out a radio. It would link through the colony ship parked in orbit overhead, and even with Aaron, if necessary. With this, she could be in clear communication almost anywhere on the continent.

In the morning Jill forced herself to eat a good breakfast. Janet, ever practical, came over and gave her a hug and a good bye without excess emotion. She also handed her a packet of fresh food from breakfast, so she would not have to begin on MRE food right away.

Just before she left, she said, "We'll keep praying for you."

Jill's head jerked back as if she had been slapped and her eyes went wide, "Who? What do you mean?"

Janet smiled. "Some of us get together to pray regularly. Don't look so offended. If I said 'good luck' and consigned you to the vagaries of blind chance, you'd take it as well meaning. Consider it the same." She smiled with a twinkle in her eye, turned and left.

Jill walked down the stairs shaking her head and thinking of the exchange. She went on through the utilitarian hallway to the dome entry. She was so wrapped in her own thoughts she had not realized the day's weather was soggy and wet and was surprised to walk out into a miserable steady light rain. She could hear a steady grumble of distant thunder to the north, signaling heavier rain there. She momentarily considered going back in and leaving later. Then she realized leaving in the rain was a good fit for her mood. She returned inside to fetch her rain poncho from her room and walked back out. She headed toward where she had left the ATV tidily covered and strapped down tight.

John Stodges came out of the H dome entrance. He came with an awkward hesitancy but straight toward where Jill stood by the ATV.

"Jill?"

She turned, surprised. "Yes? Hey, John."

"Hi, Jill. I heard you were leaving. I wanted to tell you how gutted I am and see if there was anything I could do to help." He hesitated. "Or even to make amends."

Jill looked at him steadily, straight in the eyes. "John, I don't hold you responsible for what happened. No one could. It was just a wretched accident."

John looked downcast, he shuffled a foot on the wet ground. "I still feel so bad, Jill."

She reached out a hand to put on his arm. "John, let it go. There is no guilt or fault here. It was an accident. Jack was careless to walk so close to that load. If there is anything to forgive, receive my forgiveness. Be at peace on this. It's hard to deal with, but it's not on you."

John looked up into her eyes. Rain dripped off a forelock. "Thank you, Jill. Be safe out there." He turned to walk away but Jill reached out to his arm. She pulled him around and into an embrace. He was surprised but accepted it gladly.

"Thank you," he said again, his voice husky. "Be safe." He turned and strode off around the dome, back straight and less hesitant than when he arrived. Jill sighed. She had not needed that, but John did and it felt okay.

Jill knew she would not get far that day. The steady rain and heavy low cloud cover would reduce the charge from the overhead photovoltaic panels and she would be running mostly on the charge presently in the batteries. She drove toward the familiar swimming beach and turned left before she reached the low dunes. The rolling landscape was easy and she moved

steadily west, following the gentle contours of the grass covered land as evenly as she could. Going up would use more power so she was careful to go down as little as possible. The ATV could do about 30 kph but as level and smooth as the land was, it was not a road. That speed used power faster. In the steady rain, she pushed along at about 12 kph.

As she moved further from the settlement, Jill felt her breathing ease. She had not realized she was wound up tight. She could feel it easing out as if washed away by the rain. She began to let her imagination pace on ahead of her across this trackless continent, wondering what she would find and how long it would be before people filled it. It looked as if all this land could become good farmland in time and with care. She ruminated on what the timeline would be to fill it with human life and efforts and turn this strange blue world green with earth plants?

She thought about the other colonies. News of them came but it was sketchy and her people were too full of their own work to spare much time to consider other worlds. She thought of Janet and her prayers. Was God still watching the other colonies which were not as lucky in the worlds they went to as the people on Salus were? Did He or She look after some people better than others? Why? And why did She not look after Jack? And what place did luck have in it all. Even the word fortunate referred to luck. Was there such a thing? She drove, wheels turning smoothly, as her mind ran in idle and less smooth circles.

She had made almost 60 kilometers when the power indicators showed amber and she began to watch for a place to stop for the night. It would be a cold, soggy camp but this did not worry her. She thought a low area rather than the top of a rise would provide some shelter and eased the steering to the right and toward the coast. She stopped about midafternoon. She popped up her tent and crawled in taking the remains of the food Janet had given her, her sleeping bag and the radio. Lying down on the bag she tried to relax her mind and body. She had to estimate sundown but called the settlement on the radio to check in. After eating she lay down again and let the gentle hiss of the rain on the tent lull her to sleep.

In the morning Jill put her head out of her tent and looked about. The rain was gone but the sky remained gloomy and overcast. Everything was quiet. She considered remaining in the womb of the tent. But her desire to be far from people was stronger than that urge and she crawled out. She thought she was not being drawn forward so much as she was running away. Or perhaps, she considered, she was being drawn toward solitude ahead of her.

When she looked, the indicator on the ATV showed it was already charging slowly. She gathered her things before pulling open a breakfast pack. Sitting on the passenger seat eating she looked at the low rises to the east and west. Suddenly she realized the silence was almost complete. She was unused to the near absence of ambient sound. No people, no fans, no birds, no insects, nothing crawling broke the quiet. At that moment the wind was still and there was little to hear at all. In the Twentieth Century Rachel Carson had described a "majestic silence" in Earth woods. Jill thought this silence was merely empty. Perhaps it was sad in its emptiness, but that might be herself.

Stowing her trash, she looked around to be sure nothing was left behind and sat in the driver's seat. She was careful to drink from her water bottle, remembering how important hydration was. The streams were clear and clean and she would have no shortage of water. She thought she would not need the filters and purifying tablets among her supplies.

As she drove on through the second day, Jill continued to watch the landscape. The day warmed and she moved on and on, slowly but steadily. She felt a little impatience and realized how eager she was to be far from the settlement. The country was low and even, gently rolling

and had a swept clean look. There was a wide range of blue varieties of grass. There were no boulders, no rocky outcrops, no hillocks and no trees or anything like a tree anywhere in sight.

This was the end of the rainy season. The rains came when the weather convergence moved from the northern hemisphere to the southern and again on the return in the 338 day year. Aaron had a general understanding of the climate but did not yet have enough data for exact weather modeling. In the peaceful times between rainy seasons, this coastal area had land breezes during the night and sea breezes during the day when the land heated up. There was not an overall steady wind in this area like the trades on earth.

She crossed several shallow streams leading to the ocean. As she reached the last one of the day, she refilled her water bottle before crossing.

Looking at the tranquil landscape Jill wondered if it would ever feel like home to her. She was from rural eastern Kentucky. Undeveloped places there had trees and mountains. She knew the American prairie had been grasslands. Perhaps they looked much like this in parts except for being green. She thought of how she and Jack had planned to make this their home. Like all the colonists, she and Jack had been selected mainly for their genes. And then they all had telomere therapy and epigenetic modification. They might have had a hundred years together. She pushed these thoughts away to come back to another time. It was hard to think of Jack and the future which was so changed.

She stopped not far from the coast. Later that night she awoke to a crashing sound and lay awake with her heart beating rapidly. After a few fearful minutes she realized the tide had come in and stronger waves were crashing at the top of the beach near her camp. She calmed her racing thoughts and reflected that going off alone on a still unknown planet beside a vast ocean might not have been the best of ideas. She needed the time apart and she was enjoying the travel, a new view at each rise. After the adrenaline surge waned, she thought about the parts of Earth she had known, full of people and mostly well developed. It took a while to go back to sleep.

The third day began with clean and bright sunshine. As the sun grew hot, Jill saw she was looking down on a beautiful sandy beach. She pulled up at the edge of the sand, looking toward the incoming tide. She thought she would eat before a swim and went to pull out a ready meal. Sitting against the front wheel, Jill let the sun play on her face, turning it up toward the sky. The blue vegetation seemed to rob the blue from the sky. It seemed a milky white, sometimes slightly yellow, occasionally faintly green. The blue of an earth sky was only discernible sometimes at the zenith. It was one of the things which kept the world always feeling strange. With no trees or high hills to provide shadows, her shadow and that of the ATV were usually the only hard ones to be seen in the daylight. The thick atmosphere and the breeze kept the heat from becoming oppressive.

After lunch, she walked down the beach in her underwear and swam. The water was a joy and she realized she needed to wash off. She scrubbed with her hands and thought she could stop in a stream to get the salt off if it irritated her skin. By the time she walked back to the ATV, she was nearly dry. She decided to take the underwear off and just wear the coverall for the rest of the day. Tomorrow the coverall could do with a scrub in a stream. She drove on through the afternoon.

The next day storms were visible inland, to the northeast. She could see huge thunderheads building from the convection of the heated land. It rained a little where Jill was driving. She had grown complacent during her first days and was surprised at the depth of the next stream she went through. It had a deeper channel in the middle and her front wheels dropped into it and did not want to rise out. As her rear wheels spun she realized she was stuck.

Jill felt a frisson of fear as she thought the swollen stream might still be rising from the storms inland and she was far from help. The nearest humans were four long days of driving away. She stepped off the ATV, her heart pounding with fear. Standing in the water, she bent to look at the situation with the river bottom and the wheel. The water was swift and about 40 cm deep, but clear. The front wheels were down in a shallow channel in the streambed where most of the water flowed. It was not deep enough to catch on the bottom of the vehicle, but it was steep sided.

She looked up and down the stream. There was no deadfall tree to use as a lever. There were neither trees nor boulders to attach a winch to, nothing to help. Her racing heart slowed as she realized the danger was not immediate and she began to think the problem over.

First concern was whether the stream was rising. She found a largish stone and placed it upstream exactly at the edge of the water. She could use it as a gauge of the water level.

She turned back to her vehicle. The steep sides of the channel were the problem. She went around and took the small entrenching tool that was built into the ATV with other tools. She began to dig in front of the stuck wheels one at a time to make the sides of the channel a slope rather than a step. It took nearly an hour to do as much as she thought necessary. She left the step behind the wheels largely untouched. Dropping the hind wheels down would not cause a problem and might help push the front up the slope. Going up was the concern.

After a rest, Jill walked up and down the stream gathering fist sized stones. She piled them against the upstream sides of the front wheels. When those wheels moved, some of the stones would fall into their place, raising the bed and giving a better and higher purchase when the rear wheels came there. She rested and considered the position and whether there was anything else which might help. Finally, she decided to lighten the load. She spent an hour moving all but the lightest cargo out of the vehicle bed and up the slope ahead of her.

Finally, she rested and drank deeply. The rain inland had stopped and the stream did not seem to have risen. She sat squarely in the driver's seat. Taking care not to gun the electric motor or spin the wheels, she accelerated steadily and was jubilant to feel the vehicle move up the slope. The rear wheels dropped into the channel with a chunk and she heard the rattle of the wheels gaining purchase and moving the large stones around. Then she had bumped up and out of the stream. She loaded her things as quickly as she could and drove on as if fleeing from a peril. But the peril was behind her. She soon slowed and realized how tired she was. She stopped and made a radio call to the settlement. She did not mention her difficulty that day, keenly aware that if Roberta worried about her, she might tell her to return. She climbed wearily into her tent without eating or waiting for dark.

There she curled up into a fetal position and began to cry. She cried for her loss and pain. She cried for fear which had passed and for having to do this adventure alone. She cried for having to do it without Jack. She cried because all future adventures would be without Jack. And she was sobbing and howling into an empty darkness with no other sound and no one to hear her. She finally stopped crying and was left with only hiccoughs. They stopped and as her breathing became even, she fell asleep. She slept soundly through the silent night and woke thirsty and clear headed.

She stepped out of the tent. Looking around, the landscape where she had stopped seemed almost featureless. Weird and blue and empty. But she could see the coast a short way off. She ate a good breakfast and resumed her journey, edging closer to the coast.

After lunch that day Jill stood up and stripped off her coveralls, placing them on the seat. She placed her underwear on top and walked naked down the beach. She had a small smile on

her face, thinking the nearest humans were over 200 km away. It was kind of scary alone in the night but here was an up-side. After more than five years of living in very tight quarters with other people and always trying to be somewhat modest for everyone's comfort, this seemed like a luxury. She felt as if the expectations of an entire community had been set aside with her clothes. Right at this moment she was herself and nothing more nor less. She felt tall, a superhuman on an empty new world. She thought how Jack would have enjoyed it and her smile faded away.

The water was cool and bracing but she quickly became accustomed to it and swam out from the beach. Treading water, she could feel the water moving over all parts of her body. It was a different experience from swimming in a suit. She flashed on the memory of Jack's hands moving over those same parts of her body and pushed the image away. She thought there would be days to let these thoughts in, but not now, not yet.

The water felt so good, Jill was reluctant to leave. At the same time, she was eager to move on down the coast. She swam in and walked across the sand back to the ATV, feeling the light warm wind and sun dry the salt water on her skin. She drove another thirty kilometers and stopped to make radio contact as the sun touched the horizon. Then she moved on about two clicks to find a stopping place. She knew she was bending Roberta's instructions slightly. If anyone looked at the tracker, they would know she had moved on. It did not worry her. She was stopped well before the light began to fade.

She lay outside her tent that night, content with the day. She looked up at the stars. Most were familiar though she did not really know earth constellations. She had always lived in light pollution regions. She remembered a quote which said, "I have loved the stars too fondly to be fearful of the night." She thought she should look up who wrote that. It was a lovely line. Eventually the bright Milky Way made her think of Jack and she retreated into the tent.

Jill fell into a comfortable routine as the days progressed. The worst burden of her grief was released and she was able to face and contain what she still carried. She drove between seven and eight hours each day. Whenever a decent place offered around midday, she swam, reveling in the skinny dipping, feeling free and liberated. She was amused at herself and surprised to be having fun. On day ten she knew she was far past where the scouts from the settlement had been. She was beyond where any human had gone. The idea was pleasantly titillating.

The ground continued to be smooth and undulating, covered mostly in grass. There were low spots which were marshy, forcing her inland. An ammonia smell emanated from these marshy areas, and was duly noted in her journal. Most of the streams were shallow and broad with firm bottoms to drive over. If the bottom was unclear, she walked over barefoot or in boots to check it. She did not want to get stuck again and need to call for rescue. After being stuck, Jill realized the streams were not muddy. She had never seen clay here. That made it less slippery to drive through but it also made her wonder. All the soil was sandy, lacking the rich loam and finer dirt and dust one expects on earth. It was as though the smaller particles were washed out. And there were no animals leaving manure to enrich the soils. She began to watch the ground and saw it was not like the rich soils of Kentucky or especially Ohio, Indiana and Illinois, ten feet deep in rich black loam. One more difference in the new world. She wondered if it was just in this region.

Two wider streams had long estuaries choked with tough reed-like growth and stench. She found her way around those inland. She thought with interest that having no schedule to keep she felt no frustration at the diversions. As she drove, she became more alert to changes in

the vegetation. She noted the color and texture variation and how they seemed to correspond to the landscape. Low areas had denser vegetation which looked darker. Slopes sheltered from the wind had a feathery look to the leaves. Now that she was not subconsciously driven to move far from the settlement, her pace slowed. She began to stop and take plant samples and fold them into plant presses she had brought, carefully noting the location by coordinates and description. In the evenings after radio contact, she took pictures of plants and sketched the landscape and some plants which drew her attention. Sketching was an old botany skill to make one look closely. Some days that was the total of her journal entry. She did not pour out her loss in the journal, she just documented her travel and gently stroked the memory of Jack as she drove.

The texture and color variation in the landscape began to be more noticeable to her eye and Jill found increasing beauty in it. She wondered on the nature and value of beauty. Considering what to do with that, and what to do with gratitude for it, left her subtly troubled. At least Janet had a place to direct her gratitude and Jill felt a little jealousy for that. Directing gratitude to an unfeeling, unthinking and impersonal universe was supremely unsatisfying.

On the twelfth day she was crossing a low headland with a rocky end. On a whim she stopped and walked out along the headland. The sun was hot and the grass swished against the bottom of her coveralls. She was tempted to cut them off short, but thought she would not have leg protection when she needed it.

The last visible rocks had an unusually regular appearance. They were situated so they would probably be completely exposed at low tide and covered at high tide. They were half covered now and the tide was coming in. She was not able to come close to them by walking out on the headland which was very rough. She was able to approach from the beach on the northern side, climbing carefully over the wet rocks. This enclosure had some ugly fishy remains in it. It was too decomposed to tell what kind of creature it was. The tide was now coming well in, moving up the stones. The stench of the rotting carcass washing in the ebb and flow of water made her gag. Her gorge rose. She backed away from the smell which seemed to fill her senses.

Some sea creature had evidently been stranded in the rocky pool as the tide fell and drained it, and the creature had died there. The remains were entangled in twists of stringy seaweed which had washed up into the encircling stones and were sloshing about as the waves came through the openings. Jill had the impression that this enclosure might be fashioned by something. That was a crazy idea, but it was regular and did not look natural. She could not get close enough for a better examination because of the reek and the rising water. She took pictures with her recorder slate and they became a part of the day's journal entry. She moved well down the beach on the southwest side and had a long swim, feeling as if she were washing the foul stench off herself.

Jill found she could not eat after smelling the rotting carcass. It seemed to stay with her, even if only a clinging memory. It was late afternoon. She decided to drive a little further before stopping for the night, lest the wind bring the smell. She moved past the next headland and found another inviting beach. She had grown fond of a swim at the start and end of her days.

After that day, she realized the land was going slowly upwards. Hills were now visible inland. She could see the gentle tilt of the land rising toward them. She would have hardly been aware of the upward movement except that she found each day it was a longer walk down to the water's edge. She did not want to drive down, always conscious of the power drain of uphill driving, especially if it was sandy. She would park well above her swimming place, on firm ground, with a good view out over the ocean.

With the increase in elevation, streams cut more deeply into the land and she often had longer trips inland to find a crossing. The crossings were likely to be more rugged than previously. She always checked her battery charge before entering them to be sure she had power to drive up out of the stream bed.

On the seventeenth day out, Jill woke up feeling warm and flushed. This was unusual. Apart from the common cold, most diseases had been cured on Earth. Only the new variants, like 'Flu Gamma8v7, were concerns for most of the developed world. There were few pockets of population which were not well vaccinated. Jill felt a bit sluggish and worried over it. She was grateful it was not a hot day and removed the top of her coveralls and tied them around her waist. The sea breeze made her feel less flushed as she drove through the morning. At midday she did not find an easy way down to swim and just stopped to eat and enjoy the view. She leaned against the ATV and then lay down on a blanket and slept for an hour. She woke with a dry mouth. After a long drink she drove on. When she filled her water bottle at the end of the day, she added some mineral powder to improve the taste. She noted the fatigued feeling in her journal that evening without further comment.

On day nineteen she still felt flushed and was determined to have a midday swim. She found an easy walk down to the water and stopped early. The swim was lovely and refreshing. She felt her breasts tingling in the cool water and wondered if driving topless had irritated them. Perhaps they were getting too much sun. Walking back up the slope left her surprisingly tired and she spread a blanket and slept again after midmeal. She woke with a sense of worry that she was sick but drove on for the afternoon, stopping more frequently than usual for personal relief and finding a camping spot earlier in the day than had become her habit.

On day twenty she decided to take a break and stay in one place. She was nursing her illness, or whatever was going on. The overnight spot had a rocky beach and she lay out naked in the sun, enjoying a feeling of lassitude while being a little concerned about its cause. There had been places where the grass pollen had made her sneeze and she wondered if she had found a pathogen or an allergen. It seemed unlikely, but that would be thinking in earth terms. There were no animals to carry a pathogen. The rules could be entirely different on this alien world. The worry seemed to make her lose her appetite. She skipped midmeal and did not find her endmeal appetizing. She enjoyed being warmed by the sun until it lowered in the afternoon. She said nothing of her apparent illness in her evening radio check but she did continue to make notes in the journal.

That night she woke to a sound like a running herd of something with hard hooves. She was startled and quickly moved out of the tent to look. She felt her skin prickling as the hairs on her arms and the back of her neck rose with her rush of fear. There was nothing to see but the sea nearby with the tide coming in. She thought what a comfort it would have been if the dogs were old enough to come with her. A slight breeze blew out to sea toward where the sound was. She walked timidly closer peering forward. There was no moon and only starlight but her eyes were dark adjusted. As she walked over the stones at the top of the beach, they rattled underfoot. She kicked out to brush them with a foot and realized the stones were the sound. The incoming tide was disturbing flat rocks in such a way that they chattered noisily. It was a new idea to her and seemed odd. But it was not any animal to fear. She laughed aloud in her relief and walked back to her tent to return to sleep.

Musing through the day, Jill realized she was now very far from the settlement. The distance record in the ATV, which she seldom bothered to look at, said she was 2317 kilometers from the settlement. She figured she was probably half that distance from the settlement in a

direct line. Zigzagging down the coast, her course had bent around until she was heading south-east. A straight line would be shorter to reach the settlement. She remembered the term, 'as the crow flies,' and smiled at the thought in this world with no birds. That term seemed likely to disappear. She pulled up the satellite photo on her pad and considered the distance back to the settlement. It was a long way.

Apart from her physical ailments, she was feeling refreshed and well. The ache in her heart was less, soothed by the new horizons and the solitude. She considered turning back. She still had ample food and was somewhat addicted to going forward over the next rise every day. She also thought carrying a sickness back to the settlement would not be the best choice.

On the twenty-third day she found another stone enclosures.

As Jill walked out to the end of the headland, she was looking down on what seemed to be a ring of stones with joins like lintels, across the top. It was an unusually regular ring, choked with a mess of weed which shifted in the rising and falling water. It was in the zone between high and low tide. The other had been like that, though it had seemed somehow less crafted, or possibly older and more worn. She wondered if it could be something made by an animal. There were fish on earth which made elaborate patterns on the sea bed for mating. She wondered if there was something similar going on here but it did not seem plausible.

She took a series of photos and returned to the ATV and moved on to find a place to swim. She had the strange shape in her mind as she swam. She was intrigued and decided to remain in the area overnight. She could go back and try to come close to the strange rock enclosure to see if she could get a better sense of it. She did not mention it on the evening radio check in. That could wait until she had a better look.

The next morning, she swam and ate and drove the short way back. She looked down to the beach. She thought about the tide. Low tide would be early afternoon. Jill was not sure of the exact time. Time hardly mattered to her now, except to watch for sundown. It looked to her as though at low tide she could approach the structure from along rocks on the seaward southwest side.

Jill lounged through the morning. She rearranged her ATV load so more of the used wrappings were in the middle, and food was easy to reach. She checked that her pressed plants were drying well. On earth moist pressings would be subject to mold. She had no idea if it would be similar here. There was no sign of mold but some edges might have a bacterial build up. She made sure the load was secure, though the going had been mainly easy. After a midmeal, Jill walked down to the beach and toward the headland at its northern end. She thought she would wait to swim after her examination.

This time there was no dead animal in the enclosure and Jill was able to climb across to the stones. She became convinced that they were formed by something. The spacing of the eight holes in the sides was regular. And the stones laid along the top, and over these openings, appeared to be carefully shaped and fit together. She was keenly aware it was the second such arrangement she had found. This gave her an uneasy feeling. She stood upright to look over the ocean and back at the land, as if she suspected someone of watching her. She began to feel very small and alone on an alien world.

Whether it was a year or a century or even millenia ago was not clear, but these stones were regular and they were fitted together. There was no mortar evident but there were tight joins and something kept the cross-beam stones in place against what must sometimes be extreme water pressures. In shape it was a near perfect octagon of stones, four meters across and over a meter tall, with eight slits to allow water to enter or drain out as the tide covered and

uncovered the stones. It was barely out of the water at lowest tide point and already some waves began to lap into the circle, sucking hungrily at the weed like an old man sucking his teeth. Jill looked at the advancing waves and turned to move away before they began to rise and tug at her. She would hate to be beaten on the rocks by the incoming tide as it rose. She was also feeling tired after clambering over the rocks.

She walked thoughtfully back to her camp, forgetting to stop and swim. She leaned against the ATV and sipped water thinking over the implications of a fashioned structure on this world. Could it be a fish trap for a large sea animal?

She sat by her ATV thinking, instead of moving on that afternoon. She told the radio operator about it in her evening radio contact. She tried to describe it. Her description seemed to convey less than her impression of the structure.

The response was almost formal, "We'll pass this on and see what the brass says."

Later, she lay awake for long minutes, looking at the stars and thinking of the possibilities in a limitless universe and about the erection. What was one of the main questions people asked about alien contact? She remembered hearing a discussion of the need to establish whether the alien race was intelligent, whether it was belligerent and whether it was fallen or unfallen. She could not remember the order of the questions. They had seemed so abstract and distant. Suddenly they seemed less distant.

In the morning she was eating breakfast when the radio surprised her with a chirp. She turned it from standby to on and answered. "Jill here. What's up?"

She was surprised to hear Roberta's voice. She had never been on the radio with Jill.

"Hi Jill, how's it going?"

"I'm okay. Jump to launch. What's going on?"

"We'd like you to come back in now. I hope you're ready and if not, the return journey will give you more time."

"Roberta? What's going on? I am not opposed to turning around but tell me why."

"Jill, we may have a first contact situation."

"Are you serious?" Jill paused, thinking. "You sure sound serious. These rocks do not make a first contact."

"My grandmother used to say, 'serious as a heart attack.' I never knew what it meant except 'really serious.' Yes, come back. It is not just your rock structure. We have something going on here at landing beach. More rocks, actually."

"We want you back here with us until things are clear."

"I have a thousand questions but they can wait. Roberta, I can turn around, but I cannot come in."

"Wha'd'ya mean? Why not?"

"I'm sick. I think I've found an alien pathogen. It made no sense on a world of only plants. But if there're aliens, animals here, it seems more possible. It might have come from a rotten carcass I was near."

"Wow. What a day!" Roberta paused and Jill waited for her to go on. "Jill, stay on the line. I'll get the duty medic and you can describe symptoms with her and we can discuss it. Hold on."

Jill waited about five minutes. As she waited, she pulled on her coveralls. She had felt somewhat exposed talking to Roberta with nothing on. She finished eating breakfast. The radio came back to life.

"Jill, you there?" It was the calm voice of Martha Feld.

“Go ahead, Martha.”

“Tell me what’s going on. Give me your symptoms.”

Jill described the flushed mornings and elevated temperature. She told about stopping more frequently to urinate and her loss of appetite. She also said a really bad smell had made her quite nauseous.

“So, you’re not eating?”

“Not much, the food smells bad to me, and I’ve just lost my appetite. Too many MREs; they’ve even given me acne! I just sleep instead of eating midmeal. I’ve been so tired, though I’m not doing much but driving and some swimming.”

“Have you had nausea apart from the bad smells?”

“Perhaps a little. I just don’t feel like eating. But I have a craving for something fresh, like Carol’s hydroponic tomatoes.”

Martha’s voice was soft and warm and Jill could hear the smile in it. “Oh, honey! Come home to us. You’re not sick; you’re pregnant!”

Jill suddenly found she was giggling and crying at the same time. She opened the channel so they could hear her and finally choked out words: “Okay. See you soon.” She turned the radio back to standby.

She was still crying gently as she packed up her little camp site, checked the security of her load, and turned the ATV around. She began the long, slow trek over a now-familiar landscape. It was still barren and empty in some human sense and astonishingly blue, but it was no longer alien to her eyes. She wondered what this “first contact situation” was about. What an odd phrase it seemed. And what an amazing potential! Had she seen structures they had made, these supposed aliens? On Landing Beach? Were there other structures at the beach they had only now seen? Where did they live if colonists had not seen them yet? How far off did they live? Why hadn’t scans from space seen them? She drove on, her head awl. But she had a smile on her face, and she was also thinking, “We’re going home.”